

Preserving the Privy: An Historical Look at Duxbury's Outhouses

By DEBORA KATZ

While many Americans are concerned over the coming of YK2, stocking up on household necessities such as toilet paper which analysts claim will be scarce, it seems fitting to look back to Duxbury's more common building and necessity — the outhouse.

The early American colonists referred to the outhouse as a "Privy," from the Latin word *privus*, which means private place. The latter English equivalent became known as the 'outhouse.' Privies certainly have their place in American history. For example, the building of outhouses took place as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works

in Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression, with an astonishing 2,309,239 privies being funded and built in our country from 1933 to 1945.

Although many outhouses in the America have since been

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torn down or removed—mostly during the post Victorian era when they were considered unsightly and objectionable—there

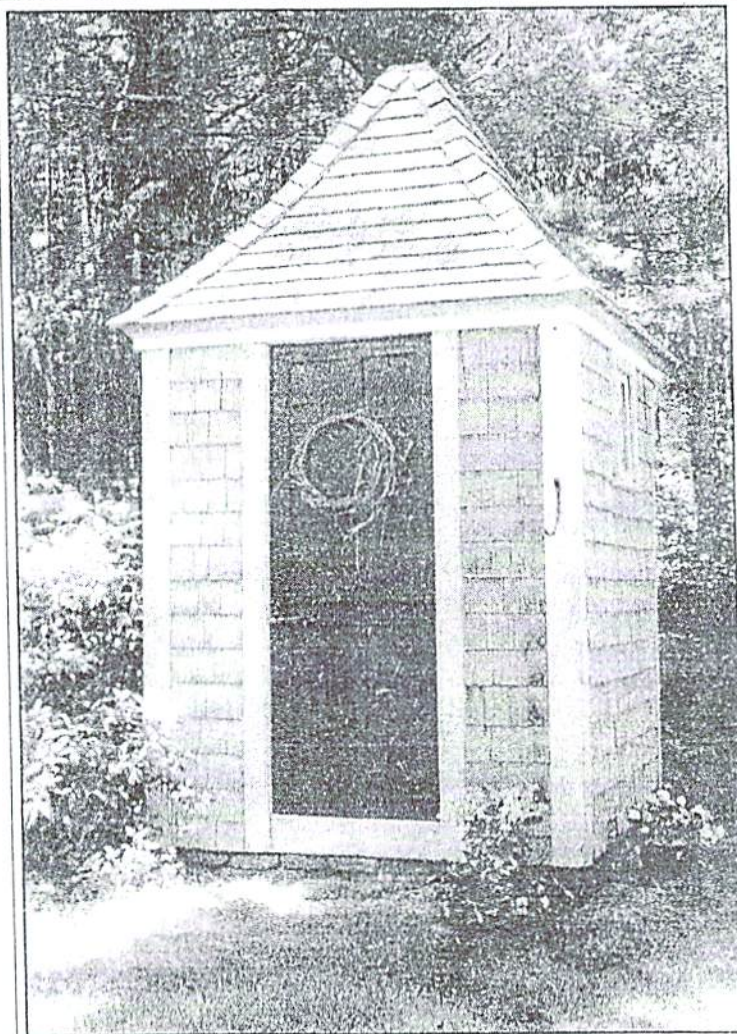
are still some wonderful examples of outhouses left in Duxbury. The ill attitude towards outhouses during the post Victorian age did cause "many well-meaning preservationists to often demolish outhouses on historical sites before any architectural surveys were done," explained Ronald Barlow in his book, "The Vanishing American Outhouse." This also explains why most school children on field trips to preserved historical sites "invariably ask the same question, "where did all the people who lived here go to the bathroom?" he added.

There is now a renewed interest in outhouses, however, by archeologists and groups such as the National Privy Diggers Association in Ohio, who see the privy as an "historical repository" of antique bottles, coins, dolls, tools and other items. Fortunately, there are also Duxbury residents who recognize the historical importance of their home's outhouse, finding new uses for them, and preserving another piece of American history.

Janet and Roger Ritch have maintained the outhouse of their historical home on Tremont Street, which was built in 1831 for the assistant minister, Reverend Benjamin Kent. "It's now used as a tool shed," said Janet Ritch.

The interesting feature of the Ritch's outhouse, is the distinctive pitched roof. This same style appears on neighboring outhouses, including the dwelling directly across the street. More than likely the same carpenter designed and built them.

Not surprising, notes lifelong resident, Elden Wadsworth, who painted and restored most of the historical homes in Duxbury. Wadsworth, now 92 years old,



A restored outhouse on Tremont Street now used as a tool shed.

Photo by Deborah Katz



Elden Wadsworth shows off a pine two seater he salvaged.

in town took pride in their privy. "They (Duxbury residents) all tried to beat each other out, it was a competition on whom had the best-designed outhouse," he chuckled.

Most outhouses were built

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with wood, and some included windows for sunlight that "ranged from small waist high diamond or square-shaped openings to more elaborate stained glass gothic arches," ex-

plained Barlow. A fine example of the square window design can be seen in the outhouse located inside the barn of The Peleg Churchill House, date boarded 1794, on Bumblebee Lane, which was restored by owners Richard and Carolyn Wadsworth.

The proximity of this barn near the house must have made it a fine choice for placement of the outhouse. "In deciding the ideal location for a privy, owners would consider soil conditions, as well as, situating it close to a water supply, such as a well, and away from public view. "Paramount, however, was the calculation of exactly how many yards a child or elderly household member could safely navigate in an emergency situation," said Barlow.

continued on page 22B

Duxbury's Outhouses

continued from page 1B

Often included in the design of the outhouse was elegant latticework, and vents carved into the door of the outhouse which would often times serve "as symbols for gender identification." Luna, the ancient crescent shaped figure which is a universal symbol for woman-kind, was used to designate the "Ladies Room" on the outhouse door for inns and other establishments. A star denoting the Sol, a sunburst symbol, was found on the doors of the men's side of the outhouse. "These symbols were necessary because in Colonial times only a fraction of our population could read or write," explained Barlow.

Elden Wadsworth recalls his family's outhouse, which served a family of eleven, having beautiful latticework. "As kids growing up we didn't have any electricity, we didn't have any running water." Nine children, including Elden, were born and raised in the family's house on Steston Place.

"There were three different sized holes in our outhouse – small for the little children, medium and large," laughed Elden as he held up an example of an old pine two-seater he had restored from a nearby demolished outhouse.

"Residential privies were most often of the two-hole variety, however, large families or those with several servants had accommodations with up to six openings in assorted sizes and shapes," said Barlow adding that "these seats were rarely

used simultaneously, unless a bad salad had been served at a church picnic!"

While today its common to find the local newspaper or magazine conveniently located in the bathroom, so to the privies of the past had their own similar supplies, although they served a different purpose. Prior to the invention of toilet paper by an Englishman named Walter J. Alcock, large mail order catalogs- the Sears Catalog being the most popular- were stored and used in the outhouse. However, in the early 1930s the majority of magazines and mail-order

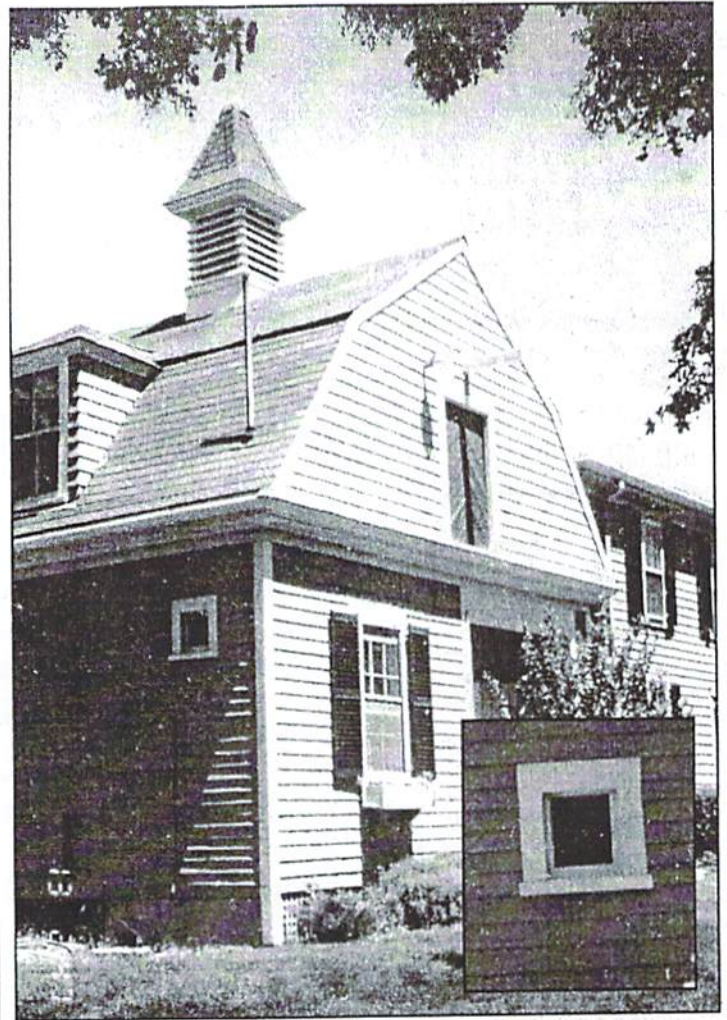
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catalogs "had converted over to slick clay-coated pages and fell into general disuse as a T.P. substitute," noted Barlow.

Prior to toilet paper, corn on the cob was a popular option and most outhouses kept a supply of them in a corncob box. "Guests often had a choice of colors, and according to privy folklore red cobs outnumbered white ones by a two to one ratio," noted Barlow.

So for those of you who are stocking up on household necessities in preparation for Y2K, it might be wise to save those summer corn cobs...you never know when they might come in handy.



This barn on Bumblebee Lane contains an outhouse inside where the small square window (inset) is located.

Photo by Debora Katz